

An Analysis of Officer Involved Traffic Crashes in Brevard County, Florida

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Abstract

The analysis of the Traffic crashes involving the employees of the Brevard County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) will be used to show training is a necessary and important issue for the Agency, the employees and the citizens of Brevard County who pay the bills for the medical costs, replacement of equipment damaged or lost and the time off the streets of the personnel involved in these crashes. The analysis will also try to show, by category, the when, where and who is involved in these costly events. A data base of one year of avoidable crash reports will be analyzed to gather this information.

Problem Statement

This Research Project will focus on the police-involved automobile crashes involving Brevard County Sheriff Office employees. Crashes during a period of July, 2003 through June 2004 will be analyzed and presented in a manner that can help BCSO with the growing problem of the cost of these traffic crashes.

Introduction

Brevard County is located on Florida's central east coast. The county encompasses 1557 square miles, which includes 299 square miles of water. Deputies of the Brevard County Sheriff's Office police the 1,557 square miles of Brevard County 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Together, they provide law enforcement services to the more than 478,000 residents of Brevard County. Deputies received 358,525 calls for service in 2002. Further, Deputies received 4,355 calls to assist other law enforcement agencies within the county (BCSO Annual Report 2002). The population is approximately 490,000 people and increased approximately 2.8% from the year 2000 to 2001 (U.S. Census, 2001.) Brevard County is home to the Kennedy Space Center, Port Canaveral, and Patrick Air Force Base and is a popular tourist destination with over 72 miles of Atlantic Ocean shoreline, space related attractions and numerous wildlife refuges. The residents of Brevard County share a common interest in the tropical locale, in showcasing and protecting its environment, and in sharing the quality of life that comes from excellent schools, responsible businesses and well-maintained parks and public facilities (Space Coast Tourism Council, 2003).

In 1997, Philip B. Williams was elected Sheriff of Brevard County. Under his leadership, the agency grew in size to over 1000 employees with an operating annual budget of over 72 million dollars. This agency provides law enforcement services to the large unincorporated areas, as well as some municipal contracted coverage, of the county. It also provides varying degrees of support to all of the county's 13 municipal police departments. Further, the agency provides security to the 18th Judicial Circuit and County Courts and staffs and operates the Brevard County Detention Center. The agency's mission involves continually working to improve the quality of life for its internal and external customers—*The agency is dedicated to providing superior law enforcement services, reduce crime, and improve the quality of life for all* (Brevard County Sheriff's Office, 2002). The agency's vehicle fleet is large due to the implementation of a take home car program for the sworn and some non-sworn employees. The number of employee involved vehicle crashes went up with the number of vehicles being operated on the streets of Brevard County. Detention Center employees operate small and large vehicles while transporting prisoners to the courts, BCSO operated farm and other details in which prisoners serve a variety of services for the citizens of Brevard County.

In 1997, the Brevard County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) was accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). The agency's mission involves continually working to improve the quality of life for its internal and external customers—*The agency is dedicated to providing superior law enforcement services, reduce crime, and improve the quality of life for all* (BCSO, 2002).

An Early Intervention Program, put into service in 2002, provides programmatic reviews of specific, significant events involving agency employees. This program is housed and maintained by the Staff Services Unit. This program enables the agency to exercise its responsibility to evaluate, identify, and assist employees who exhibit signs of performance and/or stress related problems. The Early Intervention Program (EIP) serves to identify employees possibly needing assistance with performance and/or stress related problems. The program is intended to serve as a programmatic approach to highlight behavioral tendencies, to include traffic crashes, that may otherwise be overlooked (BCSO General Orders, 2002).

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The Uniform Division and General Crimes Units of the agency are decentralized and located in five Precincts—North, South, East, West, and Canaveral. On the other hand, the Court Services Division, the Major Crimes Division, Detention Center, and Administrative/Support personnel are centralized.

The Staff Services Unit is responsible for conducting thorough, fair and expeditious disposition of complaints regarding the conduct of Sheriff's Office employees. The Unit compiles records and performs internal investigations into

allegations of misconduct concerning administrative and criminal matters. Additionally, the Staff Services Unit is responsible for reviewing all agency-involved traffic accidents. The facts and circumstances of all traffic accidents are then presented to the Loss Control Review Board.

The Loss Control Review Board coordinates and exercises supervision, on behalf of the Sheriff, over investigations of motor vehicle crashes. The Board is empowered to make any and all investigations necessary. It is responsible directly to the Sheriff or his designee. The Loss Control Review Board is composed of a Chairman, who is also a member of the Sheriff's Command Staff, (1) Classified Lieutenant, (1) Classified Sergeant, and (3) Classified Officers. Additionally, the Sheriff assigns department specialists to the Board to serve in either a voting or non-voting capacity. Specific duties of board members are assigned, as needed, by the Chairman. To conduct reviews, a quorum must be present consisting of the Chairman and at least (3) other members. Board members are required to have successfully completed formal vehicle crash and traffic investigation training. The Staff Services Unit provides counsel and assistance for the Board as requested by the Chairman. The Loss Control Review Board reviews, evaluates, and attempts to determine the cause of motor vehicle accidents. The Loss Control Review Board was established in 1997. The Board serves in order to maintain cost-effective operations, to help reduce the number of accidents and injuries, and to provide recourses for the Brevard County Sheriff's Office when it is determined to be the fault of the individual(s) involved.

Responsibilities of the Loss Control Review Board involves reaching conclusions based on facts and evidence, to determine whether an accident was "Avoidable" or "Unavoidable," to determine contributory negligence if any, and to evaluate means by which the accident could have been avoided. In all cases, the Board, based upon its evaluation, recommends to the Sheriff any changes in equipment, procedures, or training, which might preclude similar loss or damage in the future.

When accidents are determined to be "Avoidable," the Board recommends, to the Sheriff, appropriate disciplinary action, if any. The recommendations of the Board are prepared by the Staff Services Unit and presented to the Sheriff as the final authority in discipline matters.

Focus Area

The focus of this strategic plan is to develop a coherent, workable and funded strategy that will reduce traffic accidents involving employees of the Brevard County Sheriff's Office. This strategic plan will serve as a comprehensive and systematic approach to improving the road safety of employees and in particular to reduce the frequency and cost associated with traffic accidents. The purpose of this plan is to establish the framework for improving road safety and put forward a series of viable strategies for implementation by the Brevard County Sheriff's Office. I have not found any similar research in this particular focus area.

Since 2001 the reporting requirement relative to employee involved traffic accidents have remained the same—

“...any department vehicle in motion, which came in contact with another vehicle, object or person and damage or injury occurred was documented on a traffic crash report” (BCSO, 2001, General Order 200.15).

This policy has drawn criticism from the rank and file in that the reporting requirement is more stringent than the current Florida Statutory requirement for a citizen involved in a similar situation.

Currently, sworn personnel are required to attend a forty-hour block of training—Emergency Vehicle Operator, every three years. Agency civilian personnel who operate an agency vehicle must complete a defensive driving course every 3 years. If an employee is involved in a preventable or “avoidable” accident, upon the recommendation of the Loss Control Review Board, the involved employee must attend an approved remedial training course—Vehicle Operation Remedial Training (Brevard County Sheriff’s Office General Order 500.14).

An incentive program is also in place. Those employees who are “accident free” for one year receive a gift—coffee thermos, utility knife, etc. Despite the training and incentives in place, the traffic accident rate continues to increase.

“Unfortunately, some of the other news is not all that uplifting. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death in the line of duty for law enforcement officers. In 2003, 145 law enforcement officers died in the line of duty. Of these, 75 officers died in motor vehicle crashes.” (IACP, March 2005) “The FBI reported Monday that 132 police officers were killed in the line of duty in 2003, with guns and traffic accidents claiming the most lives. Of the total, which is eight deaths more than in 2002, 49 were killed in traffic accidents and 45 slain with firearms. Thirty-one of those killed with guns were wearing body armor at the time.” (AP, Curt Anderson, November 8, 2004) Heading into the final week of 2004, 154 law-enforcement officers had died in the line of duty, slightly below the average for the past 10 years, according to a report released by two nonprofit law-enforcement support organizations. But 72 of those deaths were attributed to traffic accidents, compared with 57 officers who died from shootings. (Roger, The Orlando Sentinel, 2005)

In 2001, employees were involved in one hundred and twenty (120) traffic accidents. In 2002, employees were involved in one hundred and twenty-nine (129) traffic accidents. During the period analyzed for this project there were One hundred and nineteen (119) traffic accidents, a slight decrease from the previous years.

In 2001, the Loss Control Review Board determined employees were involved in seventy-three (73) unavoidable traffic accidents and forty-three (43) avoidable traffic accidents. In 2002, it was determined there were sixty-one (61) unavoidable traffic accidents and sixty-seven (67) avoidable traffic accidents. One case is still pending review. In 2002, the agency experienced twenty-four (24) more avoidable traffic accidents and twelve (12) less unavoidable traffic

accidents than in 2001. During the period of July 2003 through June 2004, it was determined by the Loss Control Review Board there were 65 avoidable traffic crashes and fifty four (54) unavoidable crashes.

The avoidable traffic accidents experienced by BCSO for the period examined revealed the following:

- Of the sixty-five (65) avoidable traffic accidents examined, twenty-six (26) or 40% of accidents occurred while the driver was backing;
- Nearly one half of BCSO avoidable accidents involved a single vehicle. There were thirty-three (32) or 49% one-vehicle accidents;
- There were two (2) avoidable accidents or 3% of the avoidable accidents, involving injuries to BCSO employees.
- There were four (4) avoidable accidents or 6% of the avoidable accidents, involving injuries to other drivers, passengers, or pedestrians.
- There were four (4) avoidable accidents or 6% of avoidable accidents, which involved BCSO units failing to yield to another vehicle;
- There were three (3) avoidable accidents or 5% of avoidable accidents, which involved BCSO units following too closely;
- There were five (5) avoidable accidents or 8% of avoidable accidents, which involved BCSO units speeding;
- There were two (2) avoidable accidents or 3% of avoidable accidents where the weather was listed as a contributing cause of the crash;
- There were thirty-one (31) avoidable accidents or 48% of avoidable accidents which were listed as “other” contributing causes on the traffic crash report (this will be discussed at length later in this paper);
- There were fifty-nine (59) avoidable accidents or 91% of avoidable accidents where inattentiveness on the part of the operator was a factor in the crash.

Stakeholders

The employees of the BCSO have a significant stake in the outcome of these initiatives. First, reduction in accident occurrence will significantly reduce potential injury to the employee; lessen the impact of worker compensation claims and possible reduction of insurance costs. It will reduce costs associated with down time and vehicle repair and replacement and the costs associated with the insuring of the vehicle fleet.

The reputation of the agency is also another serious concern, avoidable accidents and poor driver performance impact directly upon the public image of the Brevard County Sheriff's Office. Pro-active efforts to improve performance and to reduce and prevent avoidable accidents will protect the agency's reputation and improve public perceptions.

Public interest exists in terms of public and community safety and quality service delivery. Improved road safety will reduce the risk to the public and increase the community's confidence in the services provided by the BCSO. Attention to driver performance and attitudes will also reduce the risk of

avoidable traffic accidents and will have a positive influence on the public's perception of quality service delivery.

The Brevard County Sheriff's Office has a significant interest and stake in the issues of safety for its employees and for community members. Any improvements in road safety and reductions in avoidable traffic accidents will reflect positively on all members of the agency.

A recent study found that most law enforcement recruits who receive training to become law enforcement officers receive only an average of 14 hours of training for driving skills, and a majority of that time is used to provide training in the mechanics of driving instead of providing practice for safe and effective high-speed motor vehicle pursuit procedures (National Police Pursuit Policy Act, 1996).

Strategy

Establish a focus group to develop and market an agency wide initiative to reduce traffic accidents involving employees of the BCSO. The focus group would identify causative factors relevant to the agency's avoidable traffic accidents. Further, the focus group would develop proactive accident free initiatives.

Select and assign personnel to the focus group. The focus group should be composed of a representative from the Loss Control Review Board, Risk Management, Staff Services Unit, Training Unit, Selective Enforcement Unit, Fleet Maintenance, the Grant Coordinator, and a Traffic Crash Investigator. The Sheriff may additionally assign department specialists to the focus group to serve as a member.

Proactive driver training and education is recommended as an ongoing strategy for all members of the BCSO. The type of training should be tailored to meet the needs of the type of crashes being experienced and not remain static. For example, if the trend toward backing accidents continues, then tailor the training to meet the needs, with continuing emphasis on all the documented needs of the agency. Training and education can address a wide variety of existing and newly identified issues. Information acquisition and analysis as proposed in previous strategies would result in a requirement for needs based training and education in specific areas. The defensive driving training course should place emphasis on driving skills and should focus on driver inattention, fatigue, stress and managing conflict and any other areas identified by the focus group during their review and analysis with emphasis on continuing tracking of the types of accidents.

The Staff Services Unit is responsible for conducting an annual analysis of all departmental traffic accidents. The BCSO must adopt and implement a proactive approach to dealing with the traffic accidents experienced by personnel.

As stated in the Staff Services Mission statement:

"The mission of Staff Services is to assist the Sheriff's Office administrators, supervisors and employees in maintaining unquestionable

integrity, effective and efficient police services while assuring fair and equal treatment to the citizens of Brevard County and employees of the Sheriff's Office" (BCSO 2002).

Historically, the services rendered by Staff Services have been reactive in nature; however it has been this author's experience that a progressive and proactive service is more effective and efficient. Law enforcement professionals have a responsibility to fight crime, but they also have an obligation to prevent crime. Similarly, the Staff Services Unit has an obligation to prevent misconduct, mishaps, mistakes, and even traffic accidents. Together with the Training Unit, a combined effort of tracking, training and discipline should lower these costly incidents.

Staff Services is committed and devoted to taking proactive measures to prevent misconduct, mishaps, and mistakes before they occur. The unit is committed to improving the road safety of employees and in particular to reduce the frequency and cost associated with traffic accidents.

"Heading into the final week of 2004, 154 law-enforcement officers had died in the line of duty....but 72 of those deaths were attributed to traffic accidents, compared with 57 officers who died from shootings." (Roger, 2004)

Conclusion

The employees of the BCSO are dedicated and devoted law enforcement professionals committed to fighting crime and providing the best possible services to community members and visitors alike. Notwithstanding this commitment, a need exists to reduce the number of traffic accidents experienced by employees.

The Staff Services Unit has historically been reactive in nature—addressing issues after they have already occurred. The Training Unit has been tasked with providing training both Post-Crash and Pre-Crash. It makes a lot more sense to join the initiatives of both units and take a proactive stance—to prevent misconduct, mishaps, and mistakes before they occur and prevent and reduce traffic accidents.

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